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How to appear to be perceived ethically? Martha Nussbaum's ethical conception from the perspective of political aesthetics

Abstract

The paper discusses Martha Nussbaum's ethical project from the perspective of political aesthetics, i.e. the reflection on the political significance of perception as such and the perception of beauty in particular. The article attempts to demonstrate that a full account of this type should allow for the relationship between perception and certain acts of appearing. It analyses the strengths and weaknesses of Nussbaum's project considered in such a context. This involves the reconstruction of Nussbaum's conceptions of human good and practical rationality and the search for an interpretation of society compatible with these assumptions.

Introduction – perceiving and appearing

Martha Nussbaum's contribution to the contemporary socio-political philosophy is unquestionable, the philosopher being chiefly associated with what has become known as the capabilities approach. This paradigm has been worked out by Nussbaum and Amartya Sen as an alternative to the dominating methods of assessing the quality of life, such as utilitarianism, human rights' perspectives or the Rawlsian conception of primary goods. The two thinkers argued that, instead of analysing the sum total of utility, legal guarantees or the distribution of goods, the research should be focused on people's actual possibilities of functioning – i.e. capabilities. It is this comparative use of the notion that is of main interest for Sen, an awardee of the Noble Prize in Economic Sciences. Nussbaum, however, places the idea of capabilities in a broad philosophical context, infusing it with a deep anthropological meaning. For her, capabilities first and foremost constitute a concept for human good, which, in turn, can be employed on the socio-political level. In other words, she starts with an account of a good human life, which comprises the set of basic entitlements expressed in the language of capabilities.[39]

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[39] M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 11–15.

Thus, Nussbaum forges an intricate project which spreads from the realm of anthropology towards social and political philosophy. Such a scope of reflection may seem intimidating. Yet, the philosopher manages to construe a coherent concept, whose unity, I suggest, can best be grasped by interpreting it from the perspective of political aesthetics. This is taken to mean the attribution of political significance to perception as such (from Greek: *aisthēsis* – perception) and, more specifically, to the perception of beauty. In other words, it is the analysis of the manner in which human beings as members of society perceive each other and the relevance of the notion of beauty for this process. Nussbaum's project can be regarded as an example of this approach. Drawing on her account of human good, Nussbaum claims that our practical rationality rests on the capability of the respectful perception of others. As such, perception is supposed to provide the link between anthropological and socio-political levels of her project. It is the manner in which humans, as beings equipped with a certain type of rationality, should attempt to approach each other in order to create a just community.

It could be objected, however, that perception itself is not an independent process, since the completing side of the act of seeing is the act of appearing. From an epistemological point of view, the degree of the activity of an appearing "object" could be disputed, it is reasonable, though, to assume that in the social realm perception involves an interaction between two active beings. Thus, my perception of another person is partly determined by the manner in which she appears to me, the appearing itself being irreducible to my own manner of approaching her. A comprehensive politico-aesthetic concept should comprise both of these elements.

I shall argue that, although Nussbaum's project offers a good background for such analysis, the philosopher focuses too much on the issue of perception at the cost of appearing. This turns out to pose certain limitations on the intended socio-political application of perception as a method of public reasoning. I suggest that the success of this philosophical enterprise depends on finding an account of society which would do justice to both perception and appearing. In order to meet this objective, I propose that we proceed in the following manner. First, Nussbaum's account of human good has to be presented. This will help us place perception and the problem of appearing within Nussbaum's anthropological considerations. Due to the specificity of Nussbaum's conception of human good, this will at the same time point to the socio-political implications of these phenomena. Next, an outline of a conception of society compatible with Nussbaum's assumptions will be provided. I will conclude with a few comments on an exemplification of this approach, which can be found in Wrocław's successful application for the title of European Capital of Culture.

Capabilities approach – humans as social and rational animals

As I have suggested, Nussbaum's concept rests on certain anthropological ideas. That these should have socio-political implications is clear from the outset since the philosopher underlines their value-laden character. Reluctant to rely on any metaphysical – i.e. objective and unchangeable – notion of human good, she opts

for what she describes as internal essentalism (as opposed to external essentialism).[40] This approach requires tracing the concept of 'human good' back to our own interpretations of what it means to be human. Nussbaum models it on the Aristotelian method of *phainomena*-based inquiry, *phainomena* (appearances) being not so much "pure" experiential data (as most of the translations would have it) as common sense knowledge. i.e. widespread interpretations of reality.[41] Thus, we find the first hint at the aesthetic dimension of Nussbaum's conception. The notion of human good comprises all the elements which *appear* to us as necessary to lead a good, fully human life. It is anthropocentric – based on our own *perception* of humanity – and social – imbedded in common sense beliefs.[42]

In order to find out where this quality of Nussbaum's thought stems from, we have to analyse the conception of human good in greater detail. Two levels could be distinguished within it – the features of "the shape of the human form of life" which we deem essential and the desirable ways of their development, i.e. human functional capabilities.[43] The former function as facts about the human condition (their choice, however, is already a matter of interpretation), which then are subjected to evaluative reflection. What stands out in this account of humanity is probably its focus on our animality.[44] Significantly, on Nussbaum's list, mortality and human body with its basic needs precede cognitive, social and cultural capacities. She also includes in this list the specificity of human infant development and the relationship with nature in general. Such insistence on human essential bodiliness is the characteristic mark of Nussbaum's philosophy and the core of her project. Including animality in the notion of human good, the philosopher underlines that we are needy, vulnerable creatures. These aspects of our condition are present in all spheres of our functioning, which is partly what the notion of capabilities stands for.

This takes us to the second level of the conception of human good. The set of human functional capabilities represents the criteria of a life which seems worth living.[45] Nussbaum has chosen to construe it in the language of capabilities, basing on the description of the human condition.[46] Capabilities are, as we have

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[40] See M.C. Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice. In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory* 20 [2] (1992), pp. 205–214; *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton 2009, pp. 29–32.

[41] See: M.C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 240–245

[42] *Ibidem*, pp. 290–294.

[43] M.C. Nussbaum, *Human Functioning...*, pp. 216–222.

[44] Nussbaum characterises the shape of the human form of life by the following elements: mortality, the human body, capacity for pleasure and pain, cognitive capability: perceiving, imagining, thinking, early infant development, practical reason, affiliation with other animals, relatedness to other species and to nature, humor and play, separateness (*ibidem*, pp. 216–220).

[45] Nussbaum describes the two levels of her notion of human nature as two thresholds. The lower threshold of the shape of the human form of life expresses "the bare minimum" which has to be met in order for a life to be considered as human at all. The second threshold provides a higher standard of a desirable life in which all the elements characteristics of a human life have the chance to flourish (*ibidem*, p. 221).

[46] The list includes the following items: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation (this includes the ability to form

said, defined as the possibilities of acting. When applied to the concept of human good, the concept denotes specifically human potentialities for functioning.[47] Thus, referring to Aristotle,[48] Nussbaum presents a teleological account of humanity, according to which human good is characterised not by a set of qualities but by certain developmental tendencies. This means that we are not complete, self-contained beings. On the contrary, human existence is a constant process aimed at the realisation of one's idea of a good life.

Significantly, such development requires not only maturity on the side of an individual – i.e. what Nussbaum calls "internal capabilities" to use an inborn equipment ("basic capabilities") – but also a facilitating environment. For, as the brief introductory remarks about Sen's and Nussbaum's socio-political contributions have already suggested, the notion of capabilities represents the actual life opportunities of individuals. I am capable of living healthily thanks to my innate constitution and good habits but also thanks to medical care; I am capable of making political choices if I am mature enough to form my own beliefs and if the surrounding political *regime* respects my opinion, *etc*. Thus, the capabilities which are of the greatest interest for Nussbaum (capabilities *par excellence*, we might say) are the so-called "combined capabilities", that is, internal capabilities coupled with external conditions necessary to exercise them. It is this type of capabilities which constitutes the list referred to.[49]

As we can see, then, the concept of capabilities is based on the assumption of human animality and the neediness inherent in it. It expresses an individual's reliance on external support for her flourishing, thereby pointing to one of the two distinctive features of the human type of animality, namely sociability. For Nussbaum, our social nature is therefore a reflection and extension of our lack of self-sufficiency and in this sense humans can be defined, Aristotelian-wise, as political animals.[50] We are naturally inclined to form interpersonal relationships, in which we seek the completion of our internal capabilities. However, at this point it could be objected that deriving sociability from the state of animal neediness can hardly deliver a distinctively human feature. For in this respect we are basically similar to other animals and the long period of infancy alone would not make a qualitative difference. What is crucial, though, is the other distinctive feature of the human type of animality which Nussbaum presents, namely rationality. Her understanding of this capacity is informed by the Kantian tradition with its synthesis of rationality and dignity. Thus, on the one hand, Nussbaum underscores

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relationships with other people and protection from discrimination), relation to other species, play, control over one's political and material environment (see: M.C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 78–80; *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 416–418.

[47] M.C. Nussbaum, *Women...*, pp. 71–72.

[48] M.C. Nussbaum, 'Nature, Function, and Capability', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol. 1 (1988), pp. 145–84.

[49] *Ibidem*, pp. 20–25; *Women...*, pp. 84–85.

[50] M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Harvard 2007, p. 159.

the autonomous value of each person as an autonomous end.[51] Dignity functions for her as the basic evaluative category, the consistency with it being the criterion of a good life.[52] On the other hand, she rejects the Kantian opposition of rationality-dignity versus bodiliness. Nussbaum believes that we are rational, and therefore dignified, *as* animals. Far from being a reductionist, she merely denies the existence of an ontological gap between our cognitive capacities and our animality.[53]

Thus, Nussbaum adds another element to her picture of a human animal. It is the combination of rationality and sociability that ultimately defines the specificity of our type of bodiliness. For a "truly human way" of living requires that we exercise all animal functions in a rationally planned manner and in cooperation with others.[54] At the same time, being essentially the features of animality, rationality and sociability are marked by the neediness characteristic of the bodily creatures that we are.[55] They are both expressive of an animal lack of sufficiency and, as such, interrelated. This means that, on the one hand, our rationality is essentially social. By defining rationality in terms of capabilities, Nussbaum suggests that our reflective capabilities develop in the social context in which we are embedded. Importantly, the list of combined capabilities includes not *theoretical* but *practical* rationality, i.e. the ability to define one's own life goal. This suggests that it is not abstract, theoretical thinking that defines humanity. The rationality of human animals is "garden-variety" and practice-oriented, scientific deliberations being based on everyday knowledge contained in *phainomena*.[56] Therefore, on the other hand, we are sociable as practically rational beings. Our mutual relations are imbued with ethical considerations – the questions of rightness and wrongness, goodness and evil.

Perception-based practical rationality

This lengthy introduction has, hopefully, helped us place the issue of practical rationality within the framework of Nussbaum's project. Rational and social animals are capable of reflection, which expresses their neediness and sociability, as well as their dignity. At this point, we may become aware of certain difficulty. For, on the one hand, practical rationality is, as we have said, defined as the ability to form one's own conception of a good life. Nussbaum's teleological account of human good is then rooted in the tradition of individualism and respectful of each person's right of self-determination. On the other hand, due to our lack of self-sufficiency, this right can be exercised only with some degree of external support (which is why Nussbaum rephrases it in terms of a capability). We might,

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[51] *Ibidem*, pp. 70–71.

[52] M.C. Nussbaum, *Women...*, p.73.

[53] *Ibidem*, pp. 72–74; *Frontiers...*, pp. 159–160.

[54] M.C. Nussbaum, *Human Functioning...*, pp. 222–223.

[55] "Bodily need, including the need for care, is a feature of our rationality and our sociability; it is one aspect of our dignity, then, rather than something to be contrasted with it" (M.C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers...*, p. 160).

[56] On the method of construing knowledge on the basis of *phainomena* see M.C. Nussbaum, *Fragility...*, pp. 245–263.

therefore, ask where the ethical character of our sociability stems from. Are not interpersonal bonds mere relations of the mutual exchange of services, likely to degenerate into exploitation?

This is where the conception of perception steps in. A proper manner of seeing is what it takes for a human animal to be practically rational, argues Nussbaum. In the first place, it requires that we perceive other persons as more than instruments to our own flourishing (that is, that we respect their dignity). This attitude then determines our ability to assess the situation in which an ethical judgment is made, such ability being what I shall call ethical perception.[57] Nussbaum's conception is a philosophical one, grounded in her account of human good and, as we shall see, yet more Aristotelian solutions. However, in order to present and exemplify some of its elements, Nussbaum turns to psychoanalytical narratives about the human maturational process. I suggest that we follow her along this path for awhile.

The narratives in question belong to the object relations theories of the development of the self, such as the works of D.W. Winnicott, W.R.D. Fairbairn and J. Bowlby.[58] Such choice complies with Nussbaum's insistence on the significance of interpersonal relations for practical rationality and helps to shed light on its specificity. The starting point of the object relations accounts is one of the elements featured in "the shape of the human form of life" list, namely early infant development. They begin with the state of extreme neediness "more or less unparalleled in any other animal species."[59] The weakness of the human bodily constitution – the lack of innate equipment comparable to that of other animals – results in a specific combination of helplessness and omnipotence.[60] For an infant narcisticly expects the world to revolve around her needs as it did in her mother's womb, this demand being coupled with an utter inability to cater for herself on her own.[61] At this stage, the self has not emerged yet and the infant does not differentiate herself from the world.[62] For this to happen, the sense of neediness is crucial. The infant gradually learns which of her needs she is capable of meeting on her own and which require external support. These experiences give her the sense of interior and exterior, initiating the development of the self.[63]

What is particularly important for practical rationality is that these recognitions take the form of emotions.[64] At this point, Nussbaum introduces her "neo-Stoic"[65] – as she describes it – philosophical conception of emotions. Drawing on the Stoic heritage, she presents a cognitive account of emotions as judgments about

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[57] Nussbaum uses the notion of perception in the latter context, referring to the ability of grasping a given situation. However, the former dimension is, as I will argue, a more basic one. Nussbaum describes it in the language of seeing and appearing, which justifies the extension of the concept of perception onto these issues. In this context, perception stands for a more general ability to understand reality from a given perspective.

[58] M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals...*, p. 180.

[59] *Ibidem*, p. 181.

[60] *Ibidem*, p. 196.

[61] *Ibidem*, pp. 184–185.

[62] *Ibidem*, p. 190.

[63] *Ibidem*.

[64] *Ibidem*.

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 27.

the eudaimonistic value of external goods. That is to say, emotions are assertions that certain factors uncontrolled by an individual are crucial for her well-being. As such, they express the sense of dependency on the world and record the awareness of one's separateness from the surroundings. Developing simultaneously to the emerging of individual consciousness, emotions constitute the most fundamental ways of approaching reality.

This basic cognitive capability is, however, completed by another one, as the emotions' status of judgments suggests. Following Stoics, Nussbaum conceives judgments as appraisals of appearances (*phantasmata*)[66] suggested by the senses, in the case of emotions the criterion of the assessment being the eudaimonistic value. This means that emotions consist in taking the stance on (assenting to or rejecting) what the world looks to be like, depending on whether a given appearance has bearing on one's flourishing or not.[67] Thus, we once again encounter the category of appearances. Both *phainomena* mentioned above and *phantasmata* derive from the verb *phainesthai* – 'to appear'.[68] The cognitive capability behind them is what Aristotle called *phantasia*, usually translated as 'imagination'.[69] Imagination, then, is the general ability to make the world *appear* to us in a certain way, and therefore – to *see* things *as* other things.[70]

The italicised words point to three important features of the said capability. To start from the very last, imagination is inherently interpretational as it always approaches reality from a certain perspective. It transcends raw experiential data and attaches meaning to it. Emotions represent one of the possible angles of perceiving reality[71]. They provide "the map of the world", the landmarks being items crucial for our well-being[72]. As such, they involve the exercise of imagination since they are essentially acts of interpreting reality in terms of its eudaimonistic value. Such interpretation consists in perceiving reality through the lenses of the appearances suggested by our imagination. That is to say, we approach reality with certain prejudices (in this case an idea of a good life) and, as a result, the world appears to us in a given manner and is perceived accordingly.

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[66] *Cf.* V. Caston, *Intentionality in Ancient Philosophy*, [in:] E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia in Philosophy*, Stanford 2007; http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/intentionality-ancient/#6, [retrieved: 2.10.2013].

[67] M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals...* pp. 37–38, *Therapy...*, pp. 374–375.

[68] *Ibidem*, p. 85; *Fragility...*, p. 240.

[69] M.C. Nussbaum, *The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality* [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford 1992, p. 77 [hereinafter referred to as *An Aristotelian...*,]. In the context of Stoic epistemology, *phantasmata* are also translated as "apparitions" or "impressions" (see: V. Caston, *Intentionality in Ancient Philosophy* and N.J.T. Thomas, *Mental Imaginary. From the Hellenistic to the Early Modern Era*, [in:] *Stanford Encyclopedia in Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mental-imagery/hellenistic-modern.html [retrieved: 2.10.2013]). Nussbaum's choice of translation points to the common root of common sense knowledge and individual interpretations of reality. They are both the expressions of our ability to imagine the world to be such and such. *Phainomena* have an intersubjective character but they employ the same mechanism and *phantasmata*.

[70] On Nussbaum's interpretation of the Aristotelian idea of imagination see M.C. Nussbaum, *Essay V* [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium*, Princeton 1985, pp. 221–269.

[71] M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals...*, p. 27.

[72] *Ibidem*, pp. 206–207.

Thus, Nussbaum conceives appearances as the derivatives of the human ability to interpret reality. Rather than external stimuli affecting the process of perception, they are its parts, rooted in the perceiver's perspective of approaching reality. Such stance reveals Nussbaum's tendency to focus on perception alone, which, as I have suggested at the beginning, is problematic from the socio-political point of view. Before we discuss this issue however, we need to find out what makes this aesthetic – perception-based – account of practical rationality relevant to political issues.

From perception to sociability

In order to settle these questions, we have to turn to the narrower of the two meanings of aesthetics mentioned in the beginning, namely the question of the perception of beauty. This requires that we go back to our infant, whom we have left on the threshold of personal identity. We already know that the basic sense of her separateness from the world is recorded in emotions, which are grounded in the experience of neediness. Emotions are the acknowledgments of her dependency on certain external goods requisite for her flourishing. What Nussbaum finds particularly inspiring in object relations theories is that their representatives recognise a distinct need for security (Bowlby) or a "facilitating environment" (Winnicot), irreducible to bodily needs.[73] This, in the light of Nussbaum's belief in human inherent sociability, could be interpreted as a protosocial drive. The infant feels the need for stable, secure surroundings and these are guaranteed by the permanent presence of caretakers.[74] Thus, the lack of sufficiency motivates the first interpersonal bonds, which complies with Nussbaum's insistence on the interrelation between practical rationality and sociability. Furthermore, the relationship with caretakers gives the child the sense of security, which encourages her to reflexively "turn inward, discovering her own personal life", "inner depth or creativity."[75] Therefore, her sense of identity is always a reaction to somebody else's presence and care. As such, it involves the experience of being in relationships with others.

Since the child's reliance on other people is the expression of her neediness and she values them as external goods, her emotional attachments involve the sense of a certain independence from the other person. The child realises that her caretakers are separate entities with lives of their own which she cannot fully control.[76] For this reason there always seems to be an element of wonder in interpersonal bonds. Wonder stands out in Nussbaum's concept because it is "as non-eudaimonistic as an emotion can be,"[77] being the recognition of the intrinsic value of an object without direct reference to one's idea of a good life.[78] Although in the case of intimate relationships, it is accompanied by other emotions which assert the importance of a person for the perceiver's well-being, wonder itself is

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[73] *Ibidem*, pp. 185–186.
[74] *Ibidem*, p. 187.
[75] *Ibidem*, p. 208.
[76] *Ibidem*, p. 209.
[77] *Ibidem*, p. 55.
[78] *Ibidem*, pp. 54–55.

the grasping of her autonomous worth, i.e. dignity. Thus, the acknowledgment of another person's dignity could be regarded as an act of aesthetic contemplation. She is perceived as valuable "in her own right,"[79] endowed with non-instrumental value, in other words – beautiful.[80] This also involves imagination, which helps us interpret other people's behavior as the expression of their activity and gradually recognise unique, active persons behind externalized behaviour.[81]

We discover that, on the one hand, the ethical and not merely exploitative character of social bonds is connected with the aesthetic dimension of our cognition. Individuals approach each other with reverence – characteristic for the contemplation of beauty, employing their interpretative capabilities in the attempt at reconstructing each other's inner lives. They are ends in themselves, who perceive their ends (that is – themselves) as essentially related to (the ends of) other individuals. The ability to imagine co-constitutes interpersonal bonds of mutual respect, which can later become the basis for common sense knowledge. Therefore, on the other hand, the social character of practical rationality is essentially connected with its perceptional dimension. Perception is where sociability and rationality meet.

Ethical perception – literature and public life

So far we have concentrated only on intimate relationships, such as those between a child and her caretakers. To complete the presentation of Nussbaum's project as a politico-aesthetic one, we need to demonstrate that the above account of practical rationality can be applied on a more general scale. In order to achieve this, Nussbaum asks what it means for rational animals to perform ethical considerations. She underscores that our reflection always expresses the condition of beings both dignified and needy. We are concrete individuals, who make ethical judgments in a particular situation determined by our eudaimonistic projects and the surrounding network of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, Nussbaum advocates the principle of "the priority of the particular", which she again associates with Aristotle.[82] In this situation, an ethical judgment cannot simply be deduced from general principles. These are of course useful, but they function as the Lesbian rule (a form of measurement used on Lesbos), which "¿¿bends to the shape of stone¡¡."[83] What is important is that "the bending" takes the form of perceiving, since, as Nussbaum often repeats after Aristotle, "the discernment rests with perception."[84] This is what Nussbaum calls (ethical) perception – the ability to grasp a situation in its intricacy.[85] It involves forming a judgment, after

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[79] *Ibidem*, p. 237

[80] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[81] M.C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Boston 1995, pp. 36–46.

[82] M.C. Nussbaum, *An Aristotelian. . .*, pp. 66–75; *Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature*, [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford 1992, pp. 37–40.

[83] M.C. Nussbaum, *An Aristotelian. . .*, p. 70.

[84] *Ibidem*, pp. 55, 66.

[85] See, for example, M.C. Nussbaum, *Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical*

taking into account multiple (and often conflicting) elements which are involved in this particular situation: the people concerned, the history of the relationships with them, proper general principles, *etc.* It is a kind of tact – as some translators have suggested[86] – or sensitivity to the complexity of the context.

As such, it rests on the cognitive capabilities just mentioned – emotions and imagination. Emotions point to the individual important elements of the situation, helping her differentiate between neutral and valuable issues. When emotionally involved, she is more responsive to other people,[87] whose behavior she attempts to interpret imaginatively. Imagination, as the capability of "producing" appearances, is also concrete and synthesising. Due to this capacity, the situation appears to the individual as a unique combination of various elements.[88] Thus, emotions and imagination first shape our idea of a good life as inherently connected with the good of others, and then help us form ethical judgments in accordance with the specificity of our eudaimonistic projects. Ethical perception provides the model of practical considerations compatible with this condition. It takes into account both human dignity (reflected in each person's separateness and right to self-definition) and neediness (expressed in relationships between people). This involves viewing people as unique, flesh and blood but also as interdependent beings.

Importantly, Nussbaum finds the best exemplifications of ethical perception in classical realist and psychological novels, such as the works of Charles Dickens or Henry James. Such means of novelistic expression as the focus on concrete individuals and their inner life, diachronicity and the appeal to imagination enable these texts to represent our perspective of practical reasoning.[89] For Nussbaum, then, novels have a significant ethical dimension. This claim would probably shock only postmodern literary theorists[90] if it were not for the original implications which Nussbaum draws from it – namely, the philosopher presents literary texts and, consequently, the method of ethical perception displayed in them as the models of socio-political deliberations.[91] Nussbaum believes that considerations in the sphere of public policy should respect the values reflected in ethical perception, so vividly portrayed in novels. This means that each person ought to be treated as a unique, dignified if needy being, not only in intimate relationships but also on the socio-political level. In this manner, ethical perception can have the function mentioned at the very beginning, i.e. that of providing the link between different

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Theory, [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford 1992, pp. 176–186. Although Nussbaum does not use the adjective "ethical", I propose this addition in order to underline that it is the application of a more general capability in the process of forming a particular ethical judgment.

[86] See the translator's note in the Polish edition of Aristotle's *Politics* (Arystoteles, *Polityka*, tłum. D. Gromska, Warszawa 2007, p. 121).

[87] M.C. Nussbaum, *An Aristotelian...*, pp. 78–79.

[88] *Ibidem*, pp. 77–78.

[89] See, for example, *ibidem*, pp. 84–93.

[90] On the relationship between ethical and literary theory see: M.C. Nussbaum, *Perceptive Equilibrium...*, pp. 169–172, 190–193.

[91] See: M.C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice...*, pp. 1–12; *Perception and Revolution: "The Princess Casamassima" and the Political Imagination*, [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, Oxford 1992, pp. 195–219.

dimensions of Nussbaum's concept. It is a method of applying an account of human good in the socio-political sphere.

Compassion and wonder – the priority of appearing

Does, however, perception alone suffice to cultivate the mutual respect on a socio-political scale? This might seem problematic. Ethical perception reflects the conception of rationality according to which each person is entitled to define her own idea of a good life, which also comprises the good of other people. They are perceived as important for an individual's well-being due to their inherent worth. Still, the judgment of intrinsic value and the eudaimonistic judgment constitute two sides of the same coin. In other words, it is only in connection with my own flourishing that other people enter the into the circle of my concern. Thus, the basic question to be settled if Nussbaum's concept is to be truly politico-aesthetic, is whether our perception can be so extended as to transcend intimate commitments. Are we capable of caring for people outside the most direct relationships in which we are embedded? If so, what can make us sensitive to their well-being?

All these difficulties are reflected in Nussbaum's discussion of the emotion of compassion.[92] It is a reaction to harm experienced by another person, which is judged to be serious, undeserved and of eudaimonistic value for the judging individual.[93] This suggests that compassion has political relevance since it involves some sense of the community of human condition. The judgment of seriousness presupposes a universal idea of 'human flourishing' (expressed in Nussbaum's list of capabilities), which helps us appreciate the gravity of somebody else's suffering. As such, compassion seems to be potentially addressed to all humanity. At the same time, however, due to its eudaimonistic character, it is prone to the limitations just mentioned. For Nussbaum, then, compassion constitutes the crucial socio-political issue. The success of her project depends on our capability to compassionately approach people outside our intimate attachments.[94]

Since the condition of compassion is the sense of "a common form of life,"[95] what seems to be at stake here is the notion of society. The borders of compassion are the borders of our conception of society, therefore we need to find an account of society which would meet the universal claims of Nussbaum's project. Nussbaum is inclined to reason in terms of a type of the Rawlsian Original Position argument. Namely – to recapitulate this construction in a simplified manner – she assumes that people are more likely to care for individuals who they conceive as co-members of a group governed by the same rules. Since they can never be sure in which social position they may one day find themselves, they feel concern for people of all walks of life, any of which is potentially theirs.[96] Therefore, society is envisaged

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[92] *Ibidem*, pp. 36–38.
[93] M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals...*, pp. 306–321. This definition could also be expressed in a more general, hypothetical manner: compassion is the judgment that, were certain harm to befall somebody, it would be undeserved deprivation of goods crucial to her well-being.
[94] *Ibidem*, pp. 420–421.
[95] *Ibidem*, p. 422.
[96] *Ibidem*, p. 320

as a group integrated by common interest – the search for just principles. The
sense of a shared goal of this type, however, is not an autonomous argument.
The Original Position experiment is based on the principle of equality before law
and this is granted only to those individuals who are already considered rightful
members of the group. Thus, we discover that the idea of "a common form of
life" is a politico-aesthetic notion. The question of social inclusion (that is – the
broadening of compassion) is the question of our capability to perceive other people
as our fellows.

    This turns out to be dependent on certain extra-perceptional stimuli. Here
Nussbaum's concept seems to shift from appearances understood as the constructs
of our imagination towards what I propose to describe as acts of appearing. Nuss-
baum touches upon this problem when she reflects upon two compassion-aiding
factors. The first of them is the judgment of similar possibilities, which reinforces
the eudaimonistic judgment. If another person appears to me as subject to the
same vulnerabilities as myself, I am likely to sympathise with her. The appre-
hension of our common neediness steers concern in me, thereby extending my
eudaimonistic judgement towards her.[97] In this way, the manner in which she ap-
pears to me inspires compassion, which is a type of perception. Thus, perception
is posterior to appearing, the latter being not so much my means of interpreting
reality as an expression of another person's activity. Her ability to project an
image of herself influences my attitude towards her.

    On Nussbaum's account, however, individuals are not only vulnerable but also
dignified. This assumption motivates the second compassion-aiding factor, namely
the emotion of wonder. As we have seen, it has a special and important place in
Nussbaum's concept. And it is its non-eudaimonistic character that creates its
socio-political relevance. For, although in the context of intimate bonds, wonder
is always completed by the awareness of the eudaimonistic importance of another
person – this is not part of the emotion itself. This suggests that wonder can op-
erate independently of our eudaimonistic prejudices or rather – reverse the order
of the process of making a eudaimonistic judgment. Wonder is the enchantment
with an object, which in this case is another person. It is a response to her act of
appearing as beautiful, i.e. inherently worthy. As such, she becomes included in
the perceiver's vision of a good life.[98] In this way, wonder can inspire compassion
on a broader scale. We recognise the dignity of others and start to care for them
for the sake of their intrinsic value. As in the case of similar possibilities judgment,
another person presents herself to the perceiver in a certain manner (as a digni-
fied being), which inspires wonder and this emotion, in turn, aids compassion.[99]
Adding both of the elements together, we can say that compassion requires that
people appear to one another as both vulnerable and dignified. That is to say,
they should present themselves as endowed with capabilities, i.e. as beings whose
rationality involves fragility.

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[97] *Ibidem*, pp. 318–319.
[98] *Ibidem*, pp. 54–55.
[99] *Ibidem*, pp. 321–322.

Novels versus tragedies

If Nussbaum's aesthetics (the conception of perception in general and the perception of beauty) is to be political, then, the self-projecting activity of individuals should be allowed for. In order to define the basic features of the account of society compatible with this requirement, certain revision of Nussbaum's literary inspirations might be helpful. As we have seen, the philosopher gladly points to the socio-political relevance of realist and psychological novels, which according to her, provide the best examples of ethical perception at work. Doubtlessly, they can also teach its readers compassion and wonder. After all, reading is essentially a disinterested participation in the beautiful realm of art. Books display the beauty of their protagonists, who thereby inspire wonder in readers.[100] Furthermore, novels can uncover the familiarity of the lot of individuals belonging to underprivileged groups. When readers recognise their own vulnerabilities in the lives of excluded members of society, they are likely to feel compassion towards them. This is how the novels such as Richard Wright's *Native Sun*, devoted to the problem of racial hatred, or E.M. Forster's *Maurice*, picturing a male homosexual couple, can work.[101]

The importance of novels in this respect, however, should not be overestimated. A novel is a certain object (incomplete and interpretation-dependent though it may be), and interaction with it is an intellectual play between the novel and the reader. As such, it involves the operation of imagination and appearances rather than an encounter with acts of appearing. In other words, it does not leave space for the self-projecting activity of individuals. Consequently, it does not prepare readers to open themselves up to the behaviour of the real-life counterparts of fictional characters. And since it is this type of interaction between people that can inspire the broadening of compassion, it seems that a novel's significance in this regard is limited.

However, there is another literary genre which Nussbaum likes to turn to. Although the philosopher usually refers to it in connection with her idea of ethical theory, it is relevant to socio-political issues as well. Ancient tragedies – for this is the genre in question – display the vulnerability of human *goodness* by revealing how dependent on external happenings our capability to maintain moral worth is. Consequently, they picture the fragility of human *good*, showing that uncontrolled events can easily and through no fault of ours deprive us of things which we deem most valuable, including the ability to act on our moral principles (*i.e.* practical rationality).[102] In so doing, tragedies present human life in a compassion-inspiring manner. They appeal to spectators by unveiling the familiarity of the characters' lot. As works of art, they do it beautifully, in a wonder*ful* and wonder-*inspiring* way. Unlike novels, however, tragedies break with the solitariness of reading. Intended for stage renditions, they introduce an element of dialogue, an interaction between appearing actors and perceiving viewers. Notably, it is tragedies that serve

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[100] *Ibidem*, p. 237.
[101] M.C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*..., pp. 93–99.
[102] *Cf.* Nussbaum's analyses of ancient tragedies in *Part I. Tragedy: fragility and ambition*, [in:] M.C. Nussbaum, *Fragility*..., pp. 23–84.

as the basic material for philosophical interpretations of compassion, including Nussbaum's Aristotle-based account.[103] This allows us to treat a theatrical tragic performance as the paradigmatic situation in which acts of appearing are perceived with compassion. And since the limits of compassion are the limits of our sense of community, it seems that an inclusive concept of society should likewise be founded on an image of a theatrical hall, where appearances are staged and viewed.

This line of thinking may be developed with the help of the comments which Nussbaum makes in a different context. When discussing one of the most fundamental of *phainomena*, (i.e. appearances understood as our common sense beliefs), the principle of non-contradiction, Nussbaum recalls Aristotle's claim that the validity of this principle can only be demonstrated by reference to linguistic practices. It cannot be discursively refuted because it is assumed in every speech act. Thus, its denial would be what we today call performative contradiction.[104] This epistemological remark is relevant to our current considerations not only because it shows the inherently social character of our rationality (which we have already discussed) but also because it explores the performative potential of language. The very act of making an utterance shapes our perception of reality, in this case forcing us to acknowledge the principle of non-contradiction.

What is important, theatrical performances employ the same mechanism. The words uttered by actors contribute to the creation of stage reality, which evokes certain emotions, for example compassion, in response. This suggests that the account of society required to complete Nussbaum's concept is one of a realm, where people are granted the possibility to present themselves to each other. Only when there is enough room for such activity left, can the limitations and prejudices characteristic of compassion be transcended and its universal potential met.

This proposition ought to be understood as both the improvement on Nussbaum's assumptions and their consequence. For we have seen that Nussbaum's conception of practical rationality is one-sided in that it privileges the perceiver's capability to produce appearances and her account of society focuses chiefly on the community of interests.[105] However, her idea of compassion calls for an inclusive interpretation of such community, which can be delivered only by recognising the value of the acts of appearing. Whereas "the discernment rests with perception", perception rests with the acts of appearing. To become a method of public reasoning, ethical perception has to operate in response to this self-projecting agency of

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[103] M.C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals...*, pp. 304–327.

[104] M.C. Nussbaum, *Fragility...*, pp. 251–258.

[105] It is worth adding, however, that Nussbaum sympathises with Winnicott's interpretation of art as the adult expression of childhood play. Following the psychologist, Nussbaum observes that play is crucial for the development of the capability of imagination. When playing, children learn to take roles and react to the behaviour of other participants of the game, all of which requires imaginative reconstruction of different points of view (M.C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs Humanities*, Princeton 2010, pp. 97–101). But play is essentially interactive, which suggests that imagination, as a form of perception, involves the ability to respond to the acts of appearing of another person. Unfortunately, this "playful", "interactive" aspect of imagination is not given sufficient attention in Nussbaum's writings on ethical perception, whence the above objection. At the same time, this aspect of Nussbaum's conception shows that its extension offered in this paper is suitable.

co-members of society. A politico-aesthetic concept, then, should envisage society as the space where individuals can present themselves to each other.

Urban spaces of appearing

Naturally, this approach to society has a very rich tradition. The theatrical dimension of Nussbaum's project could be developed in terms of Goffmanian dramaturgical sociology, whereas the notion of space points to Hannah Arendt's idea of the space of appearance. It is with this latter idea that I would like to conclude the paper. Rather than draw a comparison between the two philosophical projects – Nussbaum's and Arendt's – I propose to focus on the very notion of space, interpreted quite literally. That is to say, I suggest that we examine how concrete spaces can function as the exemplifications of Nussbaum's politico-aesthetic ideas. If society is conceived as space, particular spaces can be interpreted as models of society. Such reversal of the society-space comparison will hopefully shed some more light on the proposed account of society, at the same time presenting its practical relevance.

The material for such analysis can be found in the concept of urban environment conveyed in Wrocław's successful application for the title of European Capital of Culture. Significantly, the city functions here as a social microcosm, a small model of society conceived as a sphere for the acts of appearing. This is clear from the outset as the document presents the city as an intersection of various spaces – natural, social, public, private, intimate and cyber. These are interpreted dynamically, as the realms of human interaction. On this account then, a city is essentially a set of spheres, where people appear to each other on different levels.[106] At the same time, it is also a place of encounters, which facilitates the conditions for mutual understanding,[107] that is – the conception of what might count as Nussbaum's "common form of life". It brings people together so that they appear to each other as members of one community.

Significantly, the application is worded in explicitly politico-aesthetic terms. The program undertakes to regard "human moral faculty" as "the ability arising from the capabilities to perceive things and evaluate them as ones to be desired, or to be rejected."[108] Furthermore, it proposes to rediscover the ancient idea of the affinity between good and beauty, expressed in the notion of *kalokagatia*.[109] Using Nussbaum's categories, we could say that this account assumes the inherent element of wonder in our moral capabilities. An ethical judgment is an act of perceiving which involves the delight in its object, the recognition of its intrinsic value. Thus the appearing of the object stimulates its appreciative perception.

The program's appeal is for the creation of spaces where people could appear to each other beautifully, as the title slogan *Spaces for Beauty* suggests. This involves

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[106] *Spaces for Beauty. Revisited. Wrocław's Application for the title of European Capital of Culture 2016*, Wrocław 2011, p. 14.

[107] This has been deftly captured in Wrocław's promotional slogan: "a city of encounters, a city that unites" (*ibidem*, p. 9).

[108] *Ibidem*, p. 15

[109] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

the fight against "public agoraphobia" – the reluctance to enter the public space. It is assumed that people should be given the chance to shape the urban space so as to reclaim it as the real place of encounters.[110] They should also gain broader access to the experience of beauty through art and culture, whose *spaces* need to be *opened up*.[111] Furthermore, presenting *Intimate Beauty* as one of its themes, the program encourages the discovery of the beauty of human body, thereby embracing our vulnerability.[112]

I believe that what all these propositions have in common is the belief in the empowering character of the experience of human creativity. It entails the sense of agency and dignity, whence its socio-political significance. To appear beautifully to oneself and to each other, then, means to appear as a creative being. Creativity is the expression of our inherent value, of subjectivity irreducible to the status of an object in somebody else's eudaimonistic project. Hence the call for the provision of space for creativity in urban environment. People should be given the chance to explore their own and each other's agency in the process of joint determination of public space, while exercising interpretative capabilities in the experience of art and also by discovering the beauty in bodily human vulnerability. Thus, a city, and therefore society in general, is envisaged as a meeting place of beauty bearers, beauty makers and beauty perceivers. It is "a common form of life", where human creativity is the uniting element.

Conclusion

The 2016 application draws on the account of society which I suggest is compatible with Nussbaum's politico-aesthetic project. As such, it both presents the possible practical implications of Nussbaum's concept (in this case – for urban politics) and provides a model of society as the space of appearing. Based on the themes of creativity and beauty, it projects a vision of society as the realm where people can discover their own and each other's worth, drawing the sense of mutual respect from the feeling of delight.

Such an account of society allows for the values which Nussbaum's concept of ethical perception is intended to protect. We have seen that the critical point of the philosopher's project is the transition from the circle of intimate bonds into the broader socio-political sphere. Here the idea of perception, based on the concept of human beings as rational and inherently social animals, does not suffice to justify the extension of our concern outside our most immediate relationships. This is why the importance of an individual's self-projecting agency has to be recognised. I have presented the shift from perception to appearing as a line of interpretation suggested by Nussbaum's writings, which, nevertheless, require supplementation with a proper interpretation of society. Only after such completion do Nussbaum's aesthetics become political.

Finally, it has to be remembered that the scope of Nussbaum's project is global, as her universalistic approach to the notion of human good suggests. From this it follows that spaces of appearing on a larger scale should be searched. If an account

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[110] *Ibidem*, p. 11.
[111] *Opening Up Spaces* is the title of one of the programmatic themes (*ibidem*, pp. 40–41)
[112] *Ibidem*, pp. 43–44.

of global justice is to be worked out, citizens of different parts of the world could gain the possibility to present to each other the similarity of their vulnerabilities and their beauty. "Places of encounters" of various cultures and nations have to be provided in order to transcend local geopolitical commitments.